F I L E N O T E

FILE HEADING : TTEF

SUBJECT : New Production

DATE : 28 April 1997

CIR : BA, JM, CMW, SS, CB, HY, CF, NC

This is a note of the conversation AW held with JM, CMW, SS today.

It is settled that principal photography for a new series will begin at Shepperton with model building and pre-production starting soon after June.

A large number of new stories are being considered for development by Britt with David which include new characters and new scenes.

However, in the conversation the question I have raised once again: how can we be as certain as possible that the new stories will be seen as being really new and not merely variations on an old theme. [We all know that television can devour its favourites by prolonging them beyond their creative string: equally it may be possible to sense signs of restiveness in the audience; particularly with regard to Disney, who perhaps they are beginning to suspect of treating them like Strasbourg geese.]

We considered first:

THE MARKET DEMAND

We all know that over 90% of the company's income comes from TTEF license royalties. World-wide, this income is driven from the television screen; in broadcasting and in home video.

In each of the principal markets, new screen stories are needed to maintain confidence and growth; and in each of those markets, the determinant of volume required is the home video license.

Ideally these markets require the following releases:

UK - 2 volumes each year - 35/40 mins per volume
USA - 2 volumes per year - 40 mins per volume
Japan - If possible 3 volumes per year - 25/30 mins per volume.

Broadcasters in each of those territories also will welcome new material. In Japan, we need to retain Pon Kiki's interest; in the UK, Cartoon network will welcome new material in the traditional format; and in the USA, broadcast of TTEF depends on how we are able to proceed with STS.

THE PRODUCTION RESPONSE

On the basis of the demand above, and simply in terms of 5 minute stories, that suggests production of 48 new stories at the rate of 26 per year up to final delivery in fall 2000.

However that begs certain questions, namely:

i. Can the magic withstand reproduction for another 48 x 5 minute stories?

ii. Even if it could, would their production be best organised at the rate of 26 per year?

and finally:

Is there any alternative format in which the Thomas magic can be delivered which will have the same effect of supporting the market presence which is a fundamental part of the company's strategy?

5 MINUTE STORIES

It is beyond question that we must have some more stories in the classic format; that they must feature Thomas and the core band of heroes; and that as far as creatively possible they must take account of the need for more peripheral characters (who surely need only cameo roles? It is of course expensive to make a model to appear in one story only. But that must be offset against the off-screen value of the appearance).

It has been suggested that 26 new 5 minute stories by fall 2000 is the minimum required (from a possible maximum of 48).

POSSIBLE 'TV MOVIE' SINGLE STORY @ 40 MINS

It was generally agreed that except perhaps in Japan this is not a good idea.

What else might we have?

MUSIC VIDEOS

We are all agreed, I think, that good Thomas songs cut to Thomas pictures are popular and marketable. We might therefore consider commissioning some more TTEF songs, for which illustrative footage can be specially shot, as well as including footage from the stories. This would have the great benefit of allowing David to develop the landscape pictures, which in my view would go a long way to offsetting the well-known limitations of the available plot-lines, inviting critics to see the new shows as 'better than ever.'

BLUEBIRD THEMES

We discussed the pros & cons of inviting Mike & Junior to play again. It was generally agreed that the style of the present songs has set a precedent which perhaps ought to be followed consistently. But there are alternative composers who would find it not difficult to follow the style. Whoever we select, we should get on quickly.

HOW THE MUSIC IS RELEASED

The great virtue of the songs is that they can be released more than once; as inserts in volumes otherwise containing all stories; and as a collection, all together in one volume.

This lead me to the resurrection of an idea which appeared first when Garry LeCount attempted to get the first Thomas Music Video going:

POSSIBLE THOMAS SINGALONG PROGRAMME

Perhaps we might consider producing a series of programmes featuring children in a television studio playing with large models of the engines and singing Thomas and railroad songs. The programme could be shot in a chromakey studio (which could be quite sophisticated) and include sequences of parents and children playing Thomas at The Watercress Line and elsewhere as well as sequences of model animation. In principle there's no reason why the programme should not be shot separately in different territories with national casts and different languages. It might also work effectively as a PBS offering.

A POSSIBLE PRODUCER?

In the days when we were discussing a Thomas TV Club programme with Nickelodeon UK, the producer in charge of the programme was a lady called Catherine Kirkwood who was very good news. She has now left Nickelodeon and works freelance but lives in Winchester! Worth noting also that we have one of the UK's top award-winning children's choirs just a few miles away.

CONCLUSION

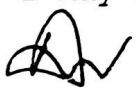
Until such time as the company has grown far enough away from TTEF for it to be allowed the luxury of some freewheeling we have no option but to keep up the screen presence.

Not to produce is not an option. The choice is between continuing to produce a cycle of the classic stories; or of finding a format or formats in which the existing screen magic can be built on in such a way that the audience can understand that we respect their enjoyment and want to enhance it.

ACTION

AW/BA will discuss and recommend hopefully before the end of the Strategy Conference.

1 May 1997



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